



Cornell University

John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

Document Title: 'Making the Stomach Believe': Cinematic Adaption

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Course: English 158

Course Title: American literature and culture

Year of Award: Spring 2002

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Winner

→ Spring 2002 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize

We are pleased to invite applications for the John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize. This prize of \$500 will be awarded to the teacher submitting the best sequence of writing assignments used in a First-Year Writing Seminar.

Assignment sequences in a writing course are built around a series of essay topics (probably for a portion of the course). Submissions should include a rationale and a description of your plans for eliciting and responding to student drafts and revisions, as well as a description of how you ready students for each essay assignment, for example by engaging them in preparatory writing exercises, including informal writing designed to help students understand the material on which they subsequently write formal essays. Reflections on what worked well, and why, and on what you would change another time would be appropriate.

Submissions are due in 159 Goldwin Smith by **Friday, May 17**. No exceptions can be made. The winner will be announced to the Cornell community, and copies of the winning assignment sequence will be made available to all interested staff.

→ Spring 2002 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize Application

Instructor's name John Dunnigan

Home address

Department English

Course title American Literature & Culture:
Narratives of the Vietnam War

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of my essay, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize.

"Making the Stomach Believe": Cinematic Adaptation

title of assignment sequence

Instructor's signature [Signature]

Date May 17/02

Spring 2002 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize

Jennifer Dunnaway

Instructor, English 158, Section 2

American Literature and Culture: Narratives of the Vietnam War

The following assignment sequence encompasses the third major unit of the course, entitled "Making the Stomach Believe": Cinematic Adaptation," which focuses on two central texts: *The Short Timers*, a novel by Gustav Hasford, and *Full Metal Jacket*, Stanley Kubrick's 1987 film adaptation of that novel. The overarching objectives of the unit are to familiarize students with the process of film adaptation and to facilitate in their writing the drawing of complex connections not only between texts, which has been addressed in previous essays, but between different *mediums* of art. All assignments are designed with an eye to achieving these two aims.

In our last class before Spring Break, I introduced *The Short Timers*, the first 50 pages of which they have read by this time, by providing some biographical information on Hasford; a general discussion ensued, largely concerning the student's first impressions of the novel. I concluded the class by drawing their attention to major themes that they may wish to look out for in their reading of the remainder of the novel, (assigned over Spring Break), and by distributing the Screenplay assignment for them to think about as they read.

The Screenplay is intended to get students thinking about cinematic adaptation by affording them firsthand experience with the process itself. Through the scripting of their chosen scene, students negotiate the special challenges and decisions of "translating" text to screen, and in so doing attain a more nuanced understanding of Kubrick's project. I included no requirements as to length or format, and in class I stressed that I wanted students to write in whatever form and to whatever length it took, in their own estimations, to do justice to their chosen scene. By neither assigning nor grading the screenplay as a formal essay, I hoped to give students the flexibility to experiment with possible ways of communicating what they pictured in their heads when they read the novel.

It should be noted that the timing of this assignment differed from that of last semester in a way that significantly improved results. In the Fall, I screened *Full Metal Jacket* when they were 50 pages into *The Short Timers* and assigned both the Screenplay and the remainder of the novel over the two weeks following the screening. The Screenplay thus took the form of a retrospective "hunt and peck" type of exercise whereby students read the novel specifically *for* the scenes which did not appear in the novel, and trotted out a script of virtually the first unrepresented scene they encountered. Thus, the emphasis on visualizing the novel *as* it was read was lost. Moreover, this premature viewing of the film in the Fall semester "contaminated" students' experience of the novel in a general sense; students reported that they read with the film already in mind, and were preoccupied with simplistic judgements concerning where the novel did and did not "live

up" to the film. Interestingly, students in my Fall class agreed with near unanimity that "the movie was better than the book." Though they had been put through the same paces as my Spring semester class, they did not develop the complex and qualified opinions that the Spring semester students articulated over the course of the unit. By reading the novel in its entirety, and with fresh eyes, well before the screening of the film, which I emphasized was merely one individual's artful interpretation of the novel, students seemed better primed to develop thoughtful and complex arguments about the relationship between the novel and the film. Later opinions as to which of the two they liked more, when they felt compelled to offer them at all, were more thoughtfully articulated through a knowledge of the means available and the limitations faced by each of the two artists, means and limitations with which they themselves had presumably been grappling for some time.

Students viewed *Full Metal Jacket* on their first day back from Spring Break (a Monday night), and their Screenplays were due the following Sunday by email. In their eJournals due on the intervening Tuesday, many students, in responding to the film, offered very specific and illuminating commentary about Kubrick's interpretation of various scenes, working through what was effective and what was less so. Their Screenplays as a whole represented a much wider range of the novel's scenes than the my previous semester's students, who all chose the same two scenes to adapt.

For the following Monday I had assigned reading on prohibitively complex theoretical topics, the very existence of which is often concealed from undergrads: excerpts from Julia Kristeva's "Powers of Horror" and Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*. The difficulty of this reading, by far the most challenging of the semester, plunged a number of my students into despair. Before addressing this, however, I began the class with a discussion of thesis construction with the help of Diane Cady's handout on the "Three Story Thesis" from last summer's Writing 700 packet. I then gave students twenty minutes to complete the in-class writing assignment on Thesis Construction, in which they were required to come up with an essay topic of their own choosing and design for the coming Essay 4a, while I assured them that they could be creative and take risks because they would not be bound to write on this topic and that there were a number of "pre-fab" topics available which I would distribute later. The reasoning behind the sequencing of events in the Monday class was that impossibly complex reading, and in particular the frustration associated with "just not getting it," revitalizes atrophied neural pathways and facilitates the formation of complex ideas, even when students are convinced they are incapable of understanding anything. Taking advantage of this ephemeral period of paradoxical clarity in the midst of confusion was the purpose behind getting them to generate theses at this time. In the discussion of the reading that followed, I laid out the basic foundations of Kristeva's concept of "the abject" and "one's own and clean self," and Theweleit's related concepts of the "fortified tower" of the fascist subject and that subject's reactionary aversion to the "softness" and "mire" of the maternal-feminine. I then invited feedback as to how we might find such concepts useful in the navigation between *The Short Timers* and *Full Metal Jacket*, and how it might help us to frame in theoretical terms the specific "spin" Kubrick put on his interpretation of Hasford's novel. (The reading for the following class, Tony Williams's article,

illustrates how one critic has done just that, drawing from both Kristeva and Theweleit). Students became comfortable discussing specific points from the readings and how they might illuminate specific moments from the film and the novel, and for the eJournal due the following evening, I suggested that they use *one* point from either Kristeva or Theweleit to illuminate a problem in either text that they had previously found mystifying. I encouraged students to use in Essay 4a anything from the week's readings they found *useful* to their argument, including the points they had developed in their eJournals, but did not make the incorporation of such complex secondary sources a requirement.

In the meantime, I provided detailed written guidance on their handwritten thesis assignments as to how they might nudge their very compelling ideas toward a "Three-Story Thesis" (relabelled a "Gung Ho Thesis" for the purposes of our class). I handed these back to the students on the following class, reiterating my wish that they use the thesis they themselves had generated as their point of departure for Essay 4a. Only at this point did I distribute my own topics for 4a, which I emphasized were "back up" topics to which they could resort if they found themselves getting "stuck" on their self-designed topics. A good three-quarters of the class settled on the topics they themselves had designed, resulting in high-quality papers in which the students were personally invested and which many reported were stimulating to write. A number of these incorporated, with varying degrees of success, the theoretical writings of the previous week.

In keeping with the themes of self-direction and ownership of their work that had characterized the assignments up to this point, I downplayed my own role in the subsequent rewrite, due the following Sunday. I returned their graded Essay 4a's the following Wednesday with solid but relatively minimal commentary, having found that the copious commentary I habitually include on first-draft essays tends to be followed too slavishly: I identify areas for development and give students possible suggestions for further thought, and instead of actually *developing* and *thinking* they tend simply to cut-and-paste my commentary into the body of the essay. To address this problem, I emphasized that the second formal rewrite was to be "more independent in character," and that they were to procure feedback from a variety of sources *outside of class time* and to decide for themselves what feedback was the most useful to their essay. My objectives were to increase further their individual investment in their work by requiring them to devote personal time to it, and to afford them the opportunity to develop their own arguments in the absence the constraint of feeling they had to figure out what *my* expectations of it were. Accordingly, I rearranged the syllabus to afford them more time for this project, mitigating the usual load of reading I had scheduled for the week they were completing their rewrites. I also met with a number of students individually, especially those for whom this was their first FWS, in the hopes that interaction and verbal feedback was not as amenable to wholesale expropriation into their work as was written commentary. Individual work with a number of students produced substantial rewards, facilitating their own clarification and development for the rewrite of the very interesting ideas they had come up with for Essay 4a.

The completed Essay 4b's, on the whole, were highly original, richly imagined, infused with energy, and several steps more complex and interesting to read than anything they had produced to this point. Many students who had not done so in 4a incorporated secondary sources into their finished 4b; a number of students expressed satisfaction with their work, and one even expressed the desire to continue working on his paper.

As I have assigned variations of this assignment sequence over two semesters, and have already had a chance to work some of the "bugs" out with respect to the timing and the students' preparation, as discussed above, further changes I would make would have to do with the reading. I would have liked to preface Kristeva and Theweleit with some degree of background, and perhaps lay out their basic arguments beforehand, in order to avoid having students so sorrowfully unprepared for the incomprehensible density of the material they were about to encounter. In addition, the Williams article, which was still useful for illustrative purposes but which was a little redundant by the time we reached it, would perhaps be more efficiently replaced by a general article on screenplay adaptation. This would be assigned further back, before the students were due to turn in their screenplays, in order to cultivate an understanding of and to place their work within a specific genre and creative tradition. I believe this would facilitate more concrete parallels (and contrasts) to the work they would later produce in the formal essays, crafted through creativity of a comparable intensity but of a different kind.

You will be required to produce a brief written statement each week in response to the following question:

What interested you most about this week's readings?

Responses will be submitted electronically to jd225@cornell.edu every **Tuesday night** no later than **2100 hours**.

Weekly submission of your eJournal entry will count for **5%** of your total grade for the semester. Entries missed or turned in late will result in a corresponding diminishment of this **5%**.

Though I would naturally prefer brief, pithy responses, a longer, more convoluted passage may more accurately reflect your thinking on our reading at the time you submit your eJournal entry. So be it.

Conversely, there may have been not one, but two or more features of the week's reading that interested you with comparable intensity. This is also acceptable.

In writing your journal entry, you will not experience any pressure to be overly clever or obscure simply for the sake of being so. I am interested in what interested *you*, so be honest. If class discussion ignited in you a previously nonexistent interest, say so. If class discussion engaged with, elucidated or extinguished your interest in a subject you'd been brooding over, I'd like to hear about it. If, of course, what interests you most about the text is something we didn't get anywhere close to in class discussion, or if you'd like to see it addressed in class on Wednesday, by all means tell me about it in your eJournal.

To get you started, here is a sampling of a near-infinite number of things that you might find interesting about the readings:

- Ambiguities/Contradictions in the author's prose: what deeper conflicts might they highlight?
- Threads of recurring imagery you've noticed (either *within* a single text or *across* a number of texts, and yes, feel free to draw upon continuities or disjunctions between the week's reading and any text we've examined previously in the course).
- The specific features of an author's *language*, and the effects you feel they are intended to produce; *why* you experienced the reaction you did.
- A particularly intriguing passage you might be interested in "unpacking" (perhaps you're aware that there is a lot "going on" in a particular passage, scene or chapter but are not yet sure how to put it all together coherently)

Above all, keep in mind that what you are producing now will become the basis of an essay topic you yourself will formulate, or alternately, will help to furnish your own unique focus or "angle" for a topic I provide to you. The entries themselves will also count toward your total writing allotment for the course. Thus, it is essential that you compile all your eJournal entries for your own reference, either in a computer file (backed up on disk) or in hard-copy form.

English 158 -- Essay #4 Preparatory Assignment: The Art and Science of Adaptation

Due: Sunday, March 31st, 2100 hours.

Submit as email attachment

Choose a scene from *The Short Timers* that was **not** represented in *Full Metal Jacket*, and rewrite it as a screenplay, complete with script and reasonably detailed camera and set directions. You may, if you wish, import your own made-up dialog or even fabricate additional characters (or scrap existing ones) if you feel you have reasons for doing so.

In a separate paragraph, comment briefly on the liberties you have taken with the text of *The Short Timers*. Have you changed the scene significantly, or is it more or less "stock"? What influenced you to make these choices? In your screenplay, what are some important elements that facilitate your ability to convey to your audience your sense of what the scene is really "about"?

English 158.02

In-Class Writing Assignment #5 – Thesis Construction

20 minutes

Come up with a single, central and probing question about the relationship between *The Short Timers* and *Full Metal Jacket*.

Suggest one possible answer to that question.

That answer is your thesis.

Essay 4a – Comparative Analysis of *The Short Timers* and *Full Metal Jacket*

Due: Thursday, April 11th at 11pm

Length: 5-7 pages, double-spaced, 11 or 12 font

Questions:

1. Select one of the following characters and discuss his portrayal in both *Full Metal Jacket* and *The Short Timers*:

Rafter Man

Gomer Pyle / Leonard Lawrence

Animal Mother

Cowboy

You may wish to explore such issues as the character's actions, dialog and development, the novel's physical description vs. the film's casting choice, the "moral weight" of the character in each portrayal (i.e., is he sympathetic or antipathetic?), and the ways in which he balances/counteracts/foils other characters, and what implications his difference between the novel and the film might have for the larger "outcome" or message of each work. Be sure to have a **unifying thesis** in the form of an arguable position on what the difference *does* to the story, and why the discrepancy in the character's portrayal is important (yes, the Animal Mother of the film is different from the one in the novel, but so what?)

2. Why does Kubrick choose to end the film where he does, with the Lusthog Squad marching through the ruins of Hue singing the *Mouseketeers* song, following Joker's shooting of the sniper? Much more than simply a convenient place to end, Kubrick's decisions here suggest a great deal – how might *meaning* be altered by the foreshortening of the story, and the omission of the entire last section of *The Short Timers*? Make connections with respect to structure, character, and anything else that strikes you as relevant, and to avoid generalizations, apply detailed attention to the texts of the later sections of both works.
3. Chart the emergence of Joker's "fascist self" (possibly with reference to Theweleit) through the novel and the film. In which account is this development most central and emphasized, and why might this be? What crucial turning points are most relevant for his character, in the novel and the film respectively, and what is each artist "saying" by either emphasizing or downplaying key incidents? How do visual elements as well as narrative ones come into play?
4. You've already done half the work yourself by posing and tentatively answering a key question about the relation between the film and the novel – and most importantly, the problem you've identified is something that interests **you** – so why not write on that topic?

Essay #4b

Due: Sunday, April 21st by 2100 hours (9:00pm)

Submit: Via email, your_email@your_institution.edu

Length: 6-7 pages, double-spaced, 11 or 12 font

Essay #4b will be a **revised and expanded** version of Essay #4a. Below are a few of the many amendments you might choose to include in #4b:

- Revise or restructure your thesis to allow for greater complexity in your argument
- Expand upon points that were only touched on or alluded to in #4a.
- Incorporate more sufficient or more appropriate textual evidence.
- Incorporate more material from either *Full Metal Jacket* or *The Short Timers* if you feel you treated one peripherally or inadequately in #4a.
- Incorporate secondary source material to support your points; all of the readings and articles we've covered in class are fair game, though you should also feel free to seek out your own materials (research).
- Include deeper, more searching analysis:
 1. To make your points completely irrefutable and watertight.
 2. To get more mileage out of your quotations or to tie your quotations back into your main argument.
- Create smoother transitions between paragraphs.
- Write a more insightful conclusion that accounts meaningfully for your findings and ties off your argument.

Grading:

Your Essay #4b will be graded on *improvement*, i.e., the level of constructive difference between the first and second paper, rather than on how "good" Essay #4b is in the absence of its context (the context being, of course, all the work you've put into it). Thus, while the grade you receive for Essay #4b may not reflect your objective standing in the course so far, it *will* indicate how adept you are becoming at substantially improving your own work.

Feedback Sources:

The rewriting process for the Essay #4b will be more independent in character. To this end, you'll be doing work outside of class to gather helpful feedback from a variety of sources, and then using this feedback selectively to maximize the potential of your essay. Required sources include:

1. Feedback from your peer editors (see list below for contact information).
 - You will print out and mark up the two papers submitted to you by your classmates (see peer editing guidelines in separate attachment).
 - You will contact your peer editors and arrange to meet one day this week to discuss exchange papers and discuss your comments (you shouldn't have to spend more than about 10 or 15 minutes on each paper).
2. Feedback from an editor at the Writing Workshop's Walk-In Service (no appointment necessary; just show up).
 - You can go any day this week except Friday or Saturday, to:
 - Rockefeller Hall, Room 178**
 - Mon-Thurs 3:30-5:30 pm and 7:00-10:00 pm
 - Sun 2:00-8:00 pm
 - Robert Purcell, Room 222**
 - Sun-Thurs 7:00-10:00 pm
 - Noyes Center, Room 320**
 - Sun-Thursday 7:00-10:00 pm
 - To maximize your (brief) time there you'll probably want to go with a specific problem or aspect of your essay to discuss.
 - To provide evidence of having been to the Writing Workshop, you'll want either a copy of your paper with a staff member's comments on it, or a signed note.

3. My suggestions from your Essay #4a.

SAVE EVERYTHING

On the Monday following Essay #4b's deadline, you will submit **in class** the following materials:

1. Your peer-edited copies of Essay #4a
2. Your copy of #4a edited by the Writing Workshop staff, or other documentation.
3. Your graded #4a from me.

Class Contact List:

GUIDELINES FOR PEER EDITING WORKSHOP: #4A TO #4B

Written Comments

Print out and carefully read the two essays submitted to you by your editors. Include written comments in the margins of your partners' essays, identifying where you find:

- a). Material that is particularly strong—what makes a strong sentence or paragraph *work*?
- b). Points you find confusing, contradictory, poorly supported, or otherwise unclear or insufficiently argued.
- c). (Most importantly, from the point of view of your partners' revisions) *ideas* in the essay that might be expanded upon, fleshed out, taken deeper or taken in different directions. What would you do with these ideas to make for an even more insightful and effective argument?
- d). Textual evidence; where is it effective, where is it lacking? How might it be more specific, concise, or relevant to the author's claim? Is it cited properly?

In general, be detailed and constructive in your commentary; imagine what kind of feedback *you* would require in order to write a better paper, which is after all what you are helping your partners to do. On the other hand, don't be afraid to be honest, even "mean" (and don't resent your comrades for returning the favor). Our sole purpose here is to improve the quality of everyone's work.

Workshop Meeting

I'm hoping you'll spend about 15 minutes on each essay, with each of you clarifying and expanding upon your advice to its author. Be sure to listen carefully when it is your essay under review; since the feedback your peers offer you will have a direct bearing on a revised paper you will soon produce, it is important that you fully understand and take into account their concerns regarding your writing.